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“An Hour with Victory.”

"AN HOUR WITH VICTORY,"

—: A PAPER :—

READ BEFORE THE OHIO COMMANDERY

—: OF THE :—

MILITARY ORDER

—: OF THE :—

Loyal Legion of the United States,

DECEMBER 2, 1886,

BY COMPANION

JAMES S. OSTRANDER,

Late 1st Lieutenant 18th U. S. Infantry.

CINCINNATI:
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AN HOUR WITH VICTORY.

COMMANDER AND COMPANIONS:

No story of the Army of the Cumberland can be so fitly introduced to an audience of soldiers, as by the linking with its chain the name of the great commander, whose imperishable renown is the rich inheritance of all, and whose veneration lies next the heart of the corps and army that followed his standard through the years of the nation's trial and leaning on his strong arm, with the firm trust of children, never knew defeat.

In the hour of peril, at Stone River, when the right had met disaster and the flushed lines of gray swept down to engulf the center, we saw order born from chaos and the full tide of victory stayed, because "the hand of the Master compelled it to pause." We saw him, in the cold chill of that terrible September day, at Chickamauga, when the lines had been broken and two thirds of the army was drifting back to Chattanooga, gather around him the fragments of the wreck, and firm as the hills against which he eaned, roll back the billows of war that beat against him until the sun went down. We saw him at Chattanooga, launching against the heights of Mission Ridge, the thunderbolt that burned through the lines of gray veterans, and sent them reeling in defeat across the river of death. We saw him at Nashville, calm, silent, immovable, resisting the impatience of high places until the hour had come, and then sweeping the enemy's lines with the besom of destruction.

At last, when the great work was ended, and the

country he had done so much to save, stood foremost of the nations ; we saw him die. I wish I might say, honored to the limit of his great deserving, but if the iron of ingratitude ever entered the soul of George H. Thomas, the true heart made no sign. He died, and the cheeks of grizzled veterans “unused to the melting mood,” were seamed with tears, as the loved commander passed onward to the Grand Army beyond the stars. Great soldier ; tried patriot ; hail and farewell.

“This earth that bears thee, dead,
Bears not alive so stout a gentleman.”

Borne down at Chickamauga, saved from utter extinction by the superb fight for life made by Thomas, the Army of the Cumberland fell back to Chattanooga and turned at bay on the foe that frowned down upon it from the encircling heights of Mission Ridge and Lookout. Its line of supply severed, a navigable river at its back, a powerful and exultant enemy on its front and flanks ; it seemed to the most hopeful that the hours of the Army of the Cumberland were numbered. Sixty-three days the devoted command faced the enemy and shovelled and starved ; while from the guns of Lookout came daily warning that the foe was impatient to be in at the death. All this time the earnest, anxious North is alive to its army’s peril, and day and night the throbbing steam monsters, with their loads of human freight, are sweeping the miles behind them in a race against starvation, with the life of a gallant army for the stakes.

From the veterans of the East and the West comes needed and trusty aid, and at last, in the mountains of Tennessee, the united forces stand shoulder to shoulder.

Hooker, with three divisions of as many armies, has fought his dramatic battle above the clouds, swept Lookout clean of the rebel host, descended to the valley of Chattanooga, and now directs his force up the valley to fall on the rebel flank at Rossville. Yonder ! on the left, where the ridge dips to the waters of the Tennessee, Sherman has

crossed to the south bank, effected a lodgment on the ridge, and is pounding with blow on blow of the great northern hammer at the rebel right. Here, in the center, in front of Chattanooga, Thomas holds the Army of the Cumberland inactive; all its thunders pent up, waiting the development of the turning movements, then to hurl it against the rebel center. This then, briefly sketched, is the position of the armies on the afternoon of November 25, 1863. Hooker, on the right, making a turning movement; Sherman, on the left, with a lodgment on the hill, and heavily engaged; Thomas in the center and waiting. Beyond the valley, a mile away, crowning the heights with infantry and artillery, lies the rebel army, waiting, too, except where Sherman knocks so persistently.

Half past three o'clock of that short November day; what work there is to do must be done quickly, if the night looks down on victory. From the group of officers on Orchard Knob, shoot out like arrows from a bow, four aides bearing orders, big with the fate of the Army of the Cumberland and the cause; down the lines of the four waiting divisions without a pause, and as each commander is found, other horsemen take up the cry and the minutes are few until every man in the expectant army knows the work before him. At the signal of six guns from Orchard Knob, Baird, Wood, Sheridan, Johnson, with their divisions, veterans of Stone River and Chickamauga, will advance, carry the rifle pits at the foot of the hill, reform and storm the heights. Never in the history of the war were soldiers charged with the execution of an order more momentous; never with a task more herculean. A mile of valley to be traversed under the fire of half a hundred guns, and beyond that, rising six hundred feet against the sky line, the ridge bristling from base to crown with veteran infantry that has crossed bayonets with its assailants on more than one bloody field; a searching sweep of the glass reveals, of these gray veterans, a continuous line at the base, a partial line midway, and a continuous line at the summit. It is a

walk and climb to fatigue a robust man, making the journey at his leisure and unopposed. Now, every foot of the way beset with peril, “stormed at with shot and shell;” it is the valley of the dark shadow leading

“Into the jaws of death—
Into the mouth of hell.”

You have all felt the terrible calm before the battle, the anxious moments before the order to advance, and while the assaulting column waits it thinks, and thoughts fly fast at such times. This soldier, with nervous eagerness, reads a letter too sacred for other eyes, and the fragments are given to the winds, while

“Something upon the soldiers’ cheek
Washes the stain of powder,”

That one has a picture, “eyes look your last, lips take your last embrace,” and close over the soldier’s heart, it rests like an amulet; hear that boyish recruit “jest at scars,” it is his first battle. Yonder sits one, rapt, silent; this Southern battle picture, with its marshalled armies, has faded away, and there, across the fields, by the roadside, stands the old farmhouse; to-morrow is Thanksgiving day, and, in this far-away Northern home, the family will gather at the fireside, trace through the columns of the weekly paper, the movements of the Army of the Cumberland; watch with anxious hearts for the mention of one brigade, one regiment, and wonder, with choking voices, how it fares with their brave soldier, whose chair stands vacant at the hearth—ay, how will it fare to-morrow, and that hill to climb to-night?—The girls serve the dinner; one of mother’s best dinners; there at table sits whitehaired father, with his hands clasped across his plate, to ask the blessing that in days gone by has fallen so often on unheeding ears, and by his side the tears welling from her eyes at thoughts of her brave soldier boy—she knows him braves; its dear devoted old mother, tender and true. God bless every hair of her old gray head! And sisters—he is penitent this afternoon—should the last sleep come to-night; from the

top of that death-crowned ridge, may all the boyish wrongs be forgiven. Mother, father, sisters, may God bless— Fall in! lively, now, men! hear the guns! Right dress! Front! Right shoulder shift, arms! Forward, guide center, double quick, march! and the divisions are away, the thunderbolt is hurled.

Now, good christian people, in your Northern homes, down on your knees before the Lord of Hosts, and until the going down of the sun, pray without ceasing for your gallant soldiers, breasting the storm of death; never had mortal men more need; through the skirting timber into the open valley, brushing away the lines of rebel skirmishers like flies, spring two double lines of blue, straight as an arrow, a mile between the flanks, as the crow flies, guns burnished and colors flying; an army with banners, gorgeous as a tournament, grand as a crusade; its destination the heights yonder, filled with foes and lined with hostile guns. Is it to be only a parade after all? The guns are silent, and the rifle pits are alive with mute but interested spectators; away on the left is the ring of angry guns, and desolation, and dead, and dying; here, no sound but the swish of the autumn grass under the tread of armed men. A quarter of a mile gone over. Why, this is only corps drill, men, are petition of the months at Murfreesboro, and there, on the ridge, as I live, is a white flag! No, by heavens, it's a gun! Another, and another, there's a man down! See that great gap in the lines! Brace up, men, dress on the colors and forward for God and country. Now, from the hill top, half a hundred guns warm to their work, shot and shell go crashing through the advancing lines, leaving dead and dying in their track, in full view of the charging column, the gray veterans ply sponge, and rammer, and lanyard; how devilishly expert they are! Now dropping shots come from the rifle pits, and here, there, yonder, men handle their muskets convulsively and drop from the line. Soon, from crown and slope and base, the roll of musketry swells the dreadful diapason of the

cannonade, the hill is on fire, a volcano in eruption, the track of the gallant army is flecked with dead and dying, and all the time the lines closing on their colors, guns at the right shoulder, grim, silent, terrible, swoop down on that doomed first line of gray, like a decree of fate. Not a cheer, not a shot; here, there, a quick spoken word of command, and always forward.

Never faltering, bending to the storm, quickening the pace as it goes, the mass of living valor—decimated now—rolls on; up to the line of levelled muskets, a death in every flash, crowning the parapet over it into the trench, a breathless moment of death and terror, and the gray defenders; prisoners to the last man, stream to the rear, pursued by the storm beating down from their friends on the hill-top. Now, for the first time, since those six signal guns a mile away, the chase finds voice, and with a “view hallo,” a glad yankee hurrah, the blue lines, merged in one, like an unleashed pack, spring at the slope. No formation now; follow your colors, and each regiment in shape like a wedge—wedges that are riving the confederate center—with the old flag streaming at its point, coils sinuously up the slope, like the link of a mile long serpent, shot answering shot, an honest cheer for every rebel yell, fighting for life, toiling over rocks, and ravines, and fallen timber as never men toiled before, the line winds upward, hanging between heaven and earth, like the hope of the faithful. No fear now, no laggard, no care, but to be first at the summit, every man a hero, and every hero a host. Back yonder, in the defenses, sits carking care; “will they make it,” is whispered with white lips? Is it possible for mortal men to scale that ridge under such a fire of hell? “It can’t be done, boys,” says a grizzled veteran, leaning critically on his musket, and earnestly scanning the hill; “it can’t be done. I’ve seen that game tried on too often.”

Will they make it! Will the sun rise to-morrow? Those men are lifted above mortality, and that blue line seaming the hill-side yonder and reaching upward, is the

scourge of God. And all the time the gallant line goes grandly upward, without a halt the second line of gray is driven back to the crest; above the heroic band rolls the live thunder, blasting where it strikes; below, the brown of the autumn landscape, dotted thick with deeper shades. Still on to the hill-top! plunged in the lurid smoke, here seen through a rift, there obscured, those heroes, cast in titanic mold and bearing the fate of empire, dying struggle and struggling die; there comes a moment when the smoke rolls down, and with a great throb of sound, the mountain stands pulseless. All of agony, or hope, or fear is in the instant. How terrible the silence! Is that the old flag crowning the hill-top and blazing through the smoke? Look again, my eyes are dim; by all the hopes of man, it is! Another and another—twenty of them! Now, Glory to the Lord of Hosts from whom all glories are, and glory to our thunderbolt of the Cumberland, that in one perilous, tremendous hour has burned through the fires of hell to the height of immortality. Down the slope rolls a great shout of victory; ringing across the valley and rousing the wounded as it goes; on to the defenses of Chattanooga, telling in gladness the story that the leaguer is raised and the red field is won.

Fifty guns, mute witnesses of valor, six thousand prisoners streaming down the slope, the wreck of a beaten army drifting away through the valley of the Chickamauga, and on the hill-top, by the side of the smoking, silent guns, weary and faint from the long march through the valley of the dark shadow, stand the Immortals; their tattered flags gilded with the mingled glories of sunset and victory and their brows crowned with laurels as unfading as time.

When the Angel of Peace spread her white wings over the field of Appomattox and unrolled the scroll blazoned with the record of valorous deeds done in the cause of liberty, lo! the story of the great charge, written in letters of light, stood foremost among the greatest.



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